

Aiiieeeee! at 45: Persistence as Generative Resistance

By Patricia Y. Ikeda

My late friend, Black radical activist Arthur McGee once said on his Facebook page that revolution is a process, not a singular event. If we connect the dots on the timeline of the many “American” literatures struggling to make themselves known, we see *Aiiieeeee!* in context of revolutionary process, a process of persistence that in the long run gains momentum as fruitful resistance to white, Eurocentric hegemony.

Like other so-called minorities in the United States, Asian Americans have written and spoken our stories and songs, painted and prayed our pains and praises, cooked and served the foods of our peoples. We are not and have never been inscrutable or silent or passive or monolithic. There is no one voice that speaks for all of us and neither do all of us speak in one voice.

“How would you define ‘Asian American’?” I asked my brilliant niece Elli Nagai-Rothe over fifteen years ago. Elli has an MA degree in International Peace and Conflict Resolution at American University, is of mixed heritage including Asian ancestry, and I expected her to give me a concluding statement. Instead, she immediately said, crisply, “I wouldn’t even try.”

Similarly, *Aiiieeeee!* resists hard definition, even as it persists in burning its hole in the pages of “American literature” books that erase through omission the voices of indigenous and people of color authors and story tellers. It is loud, angry, and imperfect in its own omissions, most notably of more Asian American women writers, and it remains generative and valuable in the process of restoring more of the jagged pieces of national narrative that itself is an impossible fiction called “America.”

Patricia Yoshiko Ikeda, a *sansei* (third generation Japanese American) poet, began publishing her poetry in the late 1970s, went underground as an artist in the 1980s during a period of monastic Zen Buddhist training, and has slowly published non-fiction, Buddhist essays, and a few poems since the early 1990s. She is one of the subjects of Yunah Hong’s 1998 documentary film, *Between the Lines: Asian American Women’s Poetry*, which offers rare interviews with over 15 major Asian-Pacific American women poets. Ikeda currently lives in Oakland, California where she is a core teacher at the East Bay Meditation Center. She’s grateful to May Fu, professor of Ethnic Studies at University of San Diego, for consultation on this essay.

As I write this, over 500 million animals and birds have died in the bushfires in Australia. I'm on an airplane from New Orleans to Los Angeles, mindful that an activist friend in Jackson, Mississippi just told me that in 25 years, it is predicted that New Orleans will be underwater. In the midst of massive local and global change, Asian American writers continue, we persist, we are part of the process of the United States of America coming to consciousness of its own construction.

I recently received an invitation to submit to an Asian American-led anthology of Zen Buddhist poetry from the Cascadian watershed. If it gets funding and is published, it will be, in part, because the anthologies *Breaking Silence*, and *Aiiieeeee!*, and *Premonitions*, and *Quiet Fire* and so much more have created the conditions for us to organize, now in bioregions, in order to be heard. Birthed from this warming planet, we rise through the mountains, we spring forth, and we flow singing and shouting through fields and cities into estuaries and bays into the oceans which carried us to this continent.